

# The Naturalist's Winter Almanac

By Field Naturalist Stacia Brezinski

## December

**1** A leaf is still a crucial part of its ecosystem well after it stops photosynthesizing. In the winter, countless insects, such as Luna Moth and bumble bee larvae, are snuggled under insulating **FALLEN LEAVES**. Many will be discovered by foraging chickadees and other birds that overwinter in Maine.



**12** **PAPER BIRCHES** are playing the delicate dance of temperature regulation. White bark reflects sunlight, preventing it from absorbing too much heat during sunny days. Why give up precious warmth during a Maine winter? If the interior gets too warm during the day, the tree could crack when the exterior rapidly cools and shrinks after the sun goes down. Its bark peels to prevent darker lichen and moss from taking hold.

**30** **LICHENS** are dormant in the winter, but they're not dead! Desiccation and the production of sugars help prevent sharp ice crystals from forming inside delicate cells. On days with higher humidity, some lichen species may actually photosynthesize.

## January

**5** Winter is courting season for many ducks, including the humble yet striking **MALLARD**. Birds from inland and northeastern Canada spend the winter on the milder Maine coast and points farther south. Watch for males and females performing courtship gestures like head-bobbing and swimming with their necks low to the water.

**10** **JUPITER** is in Opposition at 2:22 am EST, which means that the earth is directly between it and the sun. Jupiter will appear extra close and bright all night. Its four moons should be visible with a good pair of binoculars or a decent telescope.

**21** In winter, we're graced with "white-winged" gull species from up north. **GLAUCOUS** and **ICELAND GULLS** lack the black wing tips of year-round gull species like the ubiquitous Herring Gull. Iceland Gulls are smaller than Herring Gulls, and Glaucous Gulls are often larger. First-winter birds of both species are variations of creamy tan and white, and adults have light gray backs and wings with pale wing tips. Scan flocks for these uncommon Arctic visitors.



## February

**3** **LONG-TAILED DUCKS** are an Arctic species that we're lucky enough to see in Maine in the winter. Males are a high-contrast pattern of white, black, and gray, and have extremely long central tail feathers. They're small diving ducks, and can often be heard before they're seen; listen for males' amusing nasally squawks as they court females in coastal waters, especially protected bays and harbors.



**11** Bright red **STAGHORN SUMAC** fruits are a vital source of fat and Vitamin C for American Robins and other overwintering animals. These drupes (stonefruits) are small and fuzzy, and grow in tightly-packed cone-shaped clusters on furry branches, which evoke the velvet on a stag's horns.

**27** **BOBCAT** mating season is in February and March. They have smaller paws and shorter legs than their relative, the Canada Lynx, so deep snow can push them into residential areas, giving you a greater chance to see these reclusive felines in winter.